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ABSTRACT

Studies have indicated that teacher stress is a major occupational hazard of teaching. Little system research attention, however, has been focused upon concern to this point in Alabama. Through use of questionnaires, an effort was made to document the current status of the teacher stress/burnout phenomena in an Alabama setting and explore the relationships among occupational stress, responses to stress, and selected personal and situational variables of classroom teachers. The study was conducted in Huntsville City, Alabama and included 573 subjects. Three instruments were used for the study: (1) a demographic questionnaire; (2) the Teacher Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire; and (3) the Personal Lifestyle Survey. The study found that teachers in Huntsville were operating under some degree of occupationally related stress and that teachers' general responses to stress and occupational stress were related. Results indicated that teachers' responses to high occupational stress tended to be more maladaptive than adaptive. Perceptions of inadequate planning/preparation time and a general feeling of "never catching up" were identified as significant stressful elements. The profile of a teacher with high stress tendencies, based on study data, is presented, as are multiple recommendations for use of study instruments and data. (JMK)

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Teacher Burnout/Stress Management: An Exploratory Look in an Urban School System in Alabama

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Teacher Burnout/Stress Management: An
Exploratory Look in an Urban School System in Alabama

Recent proliferation in the literature suggests that teacher stress has reached epidemic proportions in many areas of the country. The literature further suggests that job-related stress has diminished the satisfaction that many teachers derive from their work, caused many good teachers to choose alternative careers, and lessened the energy and creativity that any outstanding teachers bring to their classrooms. In fact, many studies have been completed that indicate stress is a major occupational hazard of teaching. Little systematic research attention has been focused upon this concern to this point in Alabama. The research effort which provided the basis for this article was viewed as a step in that direction.

The major purpose of the study (Saunders, 1982) was to determine the relationship between occupational stress as measured by the Teacher Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire (Clark, 1980) and responses to stress as assessed by the Personal Lifestyle Survey (Everly, 1979) as perceived by classroom teachers in the Huntsville City School System in Alabama. A secondary purpose of the study was to explore the possible relationship among selected teacher personal and situational variables and the two stress measures considered in the study. Additionally, the data generated by the study were analyzed from a benchmark perspective with particular emphasis placed upon their staff development implications for the school system.

Setting of the Study

The city of Huntsville, population 145,000, basically has a combination of an industrial and an agricultural economy. The majority of the students enrolled in its schools are primarily from middle-class backgrounds. A large number of the parents of these city school students are employed in technical and professional fields; many of them have completed at least 12 years of schooling and advanced work at the college level. The 1981 median household

income for the city of Huntsville was $21,634.

In 30 years of planned and orderly growth, Huntsville has made the transition from cotton to missiles to space to diversified industry; yet, the city maintains a high level of effort in all phases. Technological and management spin-offs from aerospace projects have had a considerable impact on industries, educational institutions, and public services. The "Industrial Directory" lists nearly 505 companies with more than 33,000 employees. Less than 25% of them are working in support of missile and space projects.

The city of Huntsville can be labeled economically and culturally as perhaps the most diversified and progressive community in its population class in the United States. There is probably no other town or city in the state of Alabama that resembles it; yet, in many ways, the city of Huntsville retains a small town attitude, especially where politics is concerned. For example, in the early 1970s, the city voters of Huntsville chose the option of electing the members of the Board of Education. Previously, the members of the Board had been appointed by the City Council. The City Council was noticeably upset over their loss of power and control with the Board of Education and their disappointment was evidenced in a recent decision concerning funding.

The Huntsville City Schools primarily have three sources of revenue--state allocation, federal monies including Impact Aid, and a 1.6 million allocation from the City Council. With the decline in Impact Aid and the impact of proration on state funds, the allocation from the City Council became an increasingly important source of revenue for the Board of Education. In an effort to secure more monies to avoid further teacher layoffs and possible accreditation problems, the Board of Education asked the city voters on two occasions to approve an additional 1-cent sales tax. However, in accordance with the mood of the rest of the country, the voters of Huntsville

soundly defeated both measures.

The Madison County Commission, in what was labeled as political suicide, passed a temporary 1-cent sales tax to help the school systems of both the county and city. The City Board of Education thought that their troubles were over with this action. However, the City Council soon decided to take their 1.6 million dollars and budget it in other needed areas. With this action, the Madison County Commission threatened to rescind the 1-cent sales tax. The City Board of Education then faced additional teacher layoffs and possible school closings.

At the peak of the political rhetoric among the Board of Education, the City Council and the County Commission, with teacher layoffs and school closings as possibilities; the instrument package was distributed to the 1,400 teachers of the Huntsville City Schools.

The Study

This study was basically descriptive and exploratory. Through the use of questionnaires, an effort was made to document the current status of the stress/burnout phenomena in an Alabama setting and explore the relationships among occupational stress, responses to stress, and selected personal and situational variables of classroom teachers. The Huntsville Education Association and the Central Office of the Huntsville City Schools provided support for the study and assisted in distributing the package of instruments. Useable responses were received from 573 teachers which represented 41% of the potential respondents.

Three instruments were utilized in this study. A demographic questionnaire was developed specifically for the study. The development of this demographic instrument was influenced by a review of the literature which indicated that certain job-stress items possibly were related. The Teacher Occupational

Stress Factor Questionnaire was developed and used by Clark (1980) in her doctoral study at Auburn University. The questionnaire originally was composed of 97 Likert-type stimulus items. Later refinement of the instrument reduced it to 30 items. The third instrument used in this study was developed by Everly (1979) from the University of Maryland. The Personal Lifestyle Survey consisted of 20 items and yielded two scores which assess general responses to stress, adaptive coping and maladaptive coping.

Discussion

The findings of the study as supported by the review of related literature provided a basis for a number of conclusions which are discussed in a narrative format without the benefit of tabular presentations of the findings contained in the larger study (Saunders, 1980).

The 573 respondents (41%) included in the study fairly accurately reflect the composition of the total population of teachers in the Huntsville City School System on the several personal and situational variables included in the study such as age, sex, race, teaching experience, etc. Further, the sample of Huntsville teachers was found to be quite similar to teachers on a national scale with respect to the career decision-making concerns addressed in the study. A majority of the teachers in the Huntsville City School System are or have been in a rather ambivalent state relative to past and continuing career decisions relative to teaching and education. Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated that they had or were "giving serious considerations to leaving teaching" with 35% revealing that given a chance to start over they would not "make a career choice to become a teacher."

The teachers in Huntsville are operating under some degree of occupationally related stress. Utilizing the possible score range from 30 to 150 on the Teacher Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire and five stress levels from "Not Stressful" to "Extremely Stressful," only 16% or 91 of the respondents

were classified in the "Not Stressful" category.

General responses to stress and occupational stress were related. The significant relationship between maladaptive responses and occupational stress ($37, p < .05$) allows an additional conjecture that responses to high occupational stress by Huntsville teachers tend to be more maladaptive than adaptive. The teachers are not generally utilizing the full range of adaptive responses to stress as assessed by the Personal Life Style Survey. The use of regular exercise, relaxation techniques, and "professional assistance" are apparently being underutilized. In a similar manner, it may be noted that the respondents as a group may be over-utilizing maladaptive responses of an interpersonal relations nature (i.e., tendency to become angry or irritable, to withdraw or become depressed, to take out your frustrations on others) which would seem to be most potentially damaging in a helping profession such as teaching.

It may be concluded that the recent and continuing economic concerns of teachers have contributed to their stress. Therefore, it also may be conjectured that when economic times become more positive, the degree of stress felt by teachers may decrease. Additionally, it may be concluded the expectations of teachers for student behavior are dissonant with actual behavior of students and related quality involvement of parents. One's sense of failure and self-perceived shortcomings, such as the inability to motivate students to achieve according to capacity, tend to be stress producing. Perceptions of inadequate planning/preparation time and a general feeling of "never catching up" were identified also as significant stressors. Teacher-teacher relationships as well as teacher-administrator relationships are not perceived as sources of teacher stress in the system. This may be viewed as a positive aspect relative to dealing with other sources of stress in a productive manner.

Selected personal and situational variables which were found to be related to the stress tendencies among teachers provide clues for possible staff development efforts which might be undertaken in addressing the emerging problems of teacher stress/burnout. The profile of a teacher with high stress tendencies, based upon the data in the study, would be a white female in the 30-49 age bracket who teaches secondary academic subjects or in a self-contained elementary classroom, who was not particularly pleased with her preservice or continuing in-service/graduate preparation, and who was ambivalent about teaching/education as a career field. Additional ideas for specific focus of staff development programs are evident also in the list of high stressors identified in the study and from the range of responses of an adaptive/maladaptive nature on the general stress instrument which were discussed briefly above.

Recommendations

The three questionnaires used in this study could be utilized in experimental situations at the beginning of a school year and again at the end of a school year (pre/posttest). The sample of teachers who take part in the study could also take part in in-services activities aimed at reducing teacher stress. Specifically, such action research efforts could explore whether indecisiveness concerning teaching as a career declines as job stress diminishes or as the ability to cope with or handle stressful situations is increased.

A random sample of schools and/or systems could be included in studies which explore the relationships among stress measures as they might vary across organizational units. In such school-based studies, the perceptions of the

principals might be reviewed in light of the responses of their teachers. Data relative to the level of administrators' awareness to developing teacher stress and their organizational responses might be productively explored.

Future research could attempt to determine how stress affects teacher performance in the classroom. It is recommended that answers be sought to questions such as the following: Are teachers who work in more stressful situations less effective with students than those whose work situations are less stressful? Is there a relationship between teacher stress and student performance?

Acknowledging the successes experienced in the medical profession, appropriate attention should be given to teacher stress/burnout concepts in preservice preparation programs. Such emphasis upon career-decisions of potential teachers could possibly contribute to a reduction in the number of teachers in classrooms who have serious doubts about being there.

Subsequent attention should be given in the future uses of the Teacher Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire to the absences of stress items related to the public attitudes about schools and teachers which are viewed by some as key sources of stress which impact upon teachers and their abilities to be productive over long periods of time. Items focused upon the personal safety of teachers and students are noticeable by their absence also. The fact that items focused upon these stressors were eliminated in the original development of the Teacher Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire could be interpreted as a positive finding for schooling in Alabama and Georgia - the states in which the instrument was initially developed. One may only conjecture about their inclusion should the original item bank be utilized in a redevelopment of the instrument.

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